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ABSTRACT

A study examined students' perceptions of an instructor's use of slang and verbal aggression in giving a presentation. The study used an experiment to investigate the relationship between these two variables and students' perceptions of credibility, affect, and immediacy. Participants, 167 undergraduate communication students at a large midwestern university, attended a research session outside of class and listened to one of four audiotapes of a presentation. The instructor's use of slang and verbal aggression were manipulated in 4 conditions: with verbal aggression only: (39 participants); with slang only (39); with both (45); and, a control condition, with neither (44). After listening to the lecture, participants completed a questionnaire. Results indicated that the instructor's competence was higher in the control condition than in the verbally aggressive and the combination conditions. Participants also reported greater lecture affect for the slang condition over the verbally aggressive and combination conditions. The verbally aggressive condition was rated significantly lower than all three of the other conditions. Findings suggest that, overall, the conditions with verbal aggressiveness were perceived much more negatively than the conditions without verbal aggression. An area for further exploration is the effect of a teacher's use of verbal aggression and slang on cognitive learning. (Contains 1 table of data and 35 references.) (Author/CR)

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Students' Perceptions of a Teacher's Use of Slang and Verbal Aggressiveness in a Lecture: An Experiment

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Abstract

This study focused on students' perceptions of an instructor's use of slang and verbal aggression in giving a presentation. Participants listened to one of four audiotapes of a presentation. The instructor's use of slang and verbal aggression were manipulated. After listening to the lecture, the students completed a questionnaire that included measures of credibility, affect, and immediacy. Overall the conditions with verbal aggressiveness were perceived much more negatively than the conditions without verbal aggression. The only times the instructor who did not use slang or verbal aggression was rated significantly higher than the instructor who did use slang were for the variables of immediacy and appropriateness. Implications of the findings, future directions, and limitations are discussed.

Students' Perceptions of a Teacher's Use of Slang and Verbal Aggressiveness in a Lecture: An Experiment Introduction

How teachers communicate in the classroom with their students has a great affect on the learning that takes place in that classroom (Richmond & Gorham, 1996). From the first exposure of an instructor, until the end of the class term, what an instructor says in the classroom influences student thinking, motivation, and behavior. Teachers that appear hesitant at the beginning of the class are already judged as being less competent by their students (Haleta, 1996). In this study, the interest focused on the perceptions of students of an instructor that uses verbally aggressive messages and slang during a course lecture. To investigate the relationship between these two variables and students' perceptions of credibility, affect, and immediacy, an experiment was conducted.

Verbally aggressive messages are messages that are sent with the intent of hurting the receiver. Verbally aggressive messages merit investigation because these messages many times have a great impact on the receiver. People often feel embarrassed, angry, annoyed, and humiliated when they are the target of verbally aggressive messages (Infante, 1987; Kinney, 1994). People that are verbally aggressive lack the interpersonal trait of responsiveness (Martin & Anderson, 1996). In other words, these individuals often lack the sensitivity or caring for those that they are communicating with. In all types of relationships, research consistently shows that verbal aggression leads to negative relational outcomes (Infante, Myers, & Buerkel, 1994; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Martin & Anderson, 1995). If verbal aggression is directed towards one person or a

group of people over time, this behavior may be viewed as psychological abuse, possibly leading to learned helplessness (Infante, 1995; Infante & Rancer, 1996).

In identifying whether a given message is verbally aggressive or not, attention could be paid to the intentions of the source, the content of the message itself, and the perceptions of the receiver. Verbally aggressive messages include character attacks, competence attacks, physical appearance attacks, teasing, threats, swearing, and nonverbal emblems. Teachers at times are verbally aggressive towards their students. Telling the class that they are the worst class they ever had and will never amount to anything, threatening the class that if they do not comply they will be punished severely, or teasing the class even when it is obvious that the teasing is causing discomfort in the class, are all examples of using verbal aggression in the classroom. From previous research, the expectation exists that verbal aggression in the classroom will have negative consequences.

Slang differs from verbally aggressive messages in that there is no intention to hurt anyone by using slang. While certain slang words may be considered offensive by some, unless a person intentionally says a slang word to offend someone, using slang is not an aggressive communicative act. Some may even argue that using slang is a way of communicating effectively with one's students, depending on the ages of the participants and the type of slang that was used. The impact of slang in the classroom however is basically unknown. The following sections address several perceptions that students make about their teachers, specifically credibility, affect, and immediacy.

Credibility in the Classroom

Source credibility refers to perceptions of a receiver on whether a source's believable or not (McCroskey, 1992). In the classroom, source credibility relates to whether students perceive their instructor as being a person who has knowledge in the topic area, a person who is able to communicate the knowledge of the course in an effective manner, and a person who's word can be trusted, whether it be the contract of the course syllabus or a promise made to the class.

Two often cited components of credibility are competence and character. Competence involves having knowledge or expertise in a given area (McCroskey, 1992). Teachers who appear to know their topic area are perceived as being more credible. When teachers are perceived as more credible, those teachers are more effective in influencing their students (Booth-Butterfield, 1992). Competence of an instructor is based in part on how that instructor communicates. When an instructor uses language that shows ignorance or lack of caring for the student, that instructor would be viewed as not competent (i.e., not credible).

The second main component of credibility is character. Character involves the degree of trust a receiver has with a source (McCroskey, 1992). Teachers who demonstrate to their students that they can be trusted in their teacher-student relationships are perceived as being high in character. When students believe that their instructor is not being truthful to them, when they believe that their instructor says one thing and does another, and if they perceive the instructor as being not interested in whether the students learn the material or not, that instructor is perceived as being low in character (i.e., low in credibility).

McCroskey (1992) argued that while a teacher can be high in competence and character, low in one and high in the other, or low in both, only the teacher who is high both characteristics should be considered to have credibility in the classroom. When teachers use verbally aggressive messages, especially when they are specifically directed at students, they are likely to be perceived low in credibility. What cannot be predicted as clearly is the impact of slang on credibility. One might speculate that slang could be viewed negatively or positively. Another classroom variable that is related to credibility and should be related to verbal aggression and slang is affect.

Affect in the Classroom

Affective learning deals with the students attitudes, beliefs, and values that relate to the knowledge and psychomotor skills that students have acquired (Mottet & Thweat, 1996). The importance of affective learning is well established in the instructional literature. Richmond and Gorham (1996) posit that students that have lower affect for school "learn less, engage in recommended behaviors less often, are less responsive in the classroom, are less likely to comply with a teacher's request, and if not forced to attend class will attend class less frequently" (p. 183). Therefore we see that affective learning is related to the students behavioral choices concerning school.

The attainment of higher level cognitive learning is also associated with affective learning and students use cognitive and affective goals simultaneously. Past research supports the assertion that if students have a positive affect for school their affect may serve as a motivational force that drives them to higher levels of cognitive learning and self-directed study (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). Seemingly, if students enjoy school they will attend to their classes and studies

more regularly. This increase in eagerness, or motivation, server to increase the likelihood of the students higher level cognitive learning (Richmond & Gorham, 1996). This study intended to consider the impact of verbal aggressiveness and slang on affect for the instructor and affect for the topic/lecture.

Immediacy in the Classroom

The importance of teacher immediacy as an element of teaching effectiveness has been a major focus of the instructional research on student learning (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987; Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). Based on the original conceptualization posed by Mehrabian (1969), immediacy is defined as "the degree of perceived physical or psychological distance between people in a relationship" (Richmond, 1996). In the instructional literature, immediacy refers to both verbal and nonverbal communicative behavior that serve to create the perception of "closeness" between the teacher and student.

Verbal immediacy is characterized by several key verbal behaviors. An important study conducted by Gorham (1988) found that the types of verbal messages that seem to have the greatest positive impact on student learning include teachers' use of humor, praise of students' contributions to the class, and frequently initiating conversation inside or outside of the classroom. In addition, self-disclosure by the teacher, the use of inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our", allowing for discussion on topics not necessarily part of the lecture, encouraging students to talk and ask questions, providing feedback and asking for student feedback about assignments, and availability outside of

class all contribute positively to students' perceptions of their cognitive and affective learning.

Subsequent research has posed a relationship between the use of humor, immediacy behaviors, and student learning (Gorham & Christophel, 1990). When teachers use humor in conjunction with immediacy behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal), the results indicate that appropriate amounts and types of humor are related to students' perceptions of teachers' immediacy, and consequently student learning.

Nonverbal immediacy has been studied extensively and the research seems to indicate that certain nonverbal behaviors are found to produce positive outcomes in student affective learning (Andersen, 1979; Kelly & Gorham, 1988; Plax et al., 1986). Research conducted by Richmond et al. (1987) demonstrated that nonverbal behaviors such as vocal expressiveness, smiling, and having a relaxed body position have the most positive effects on students' perceived cognitive learning. Additionally, teacher movement around the classroom and eye contact with the class made a significant contribution to learning increases.

Seemingly, verbally aggressive messages by a teacher would lead to less student immediacy. Students would not find that a teacher that insults them to be psychologically close to them. The relationship between slang and immediacy is not as clear. Students may perceive slang as a teacher's attempt to be student oriented, or students may believe that the teacher is speaking inappropriately. To further understand the effect of teachers' slang and verbal aggressiveness in the classroom on their students, the following research question was offered.

RQ1: How does a teacher's use of slang and verbally aggressive messages in a lecture influence a student's perceptions of the instructor and the lecture?

Method

Participants

Participants were 167 undergraduate students at a large midwestern university who were enrolled in undergraduate communication courses. Participation in this study was one of several ways students could earn extra research credit. Of the 167 students, 97 identified themselves as women, 66 as men, while 4 did not identify their sex. Their average age was 20.71 (SD = 2.28), with 61 of the students reporting being freshmen, 23 sophomores, 31 juniors, and 52 seniors.

Manipulation

Two variables were manipulated in this experiment, the use of verbal aggression and the use of slang. In condition one, students listened to a lecture that included verbally aggressive messages, but no slang. Condition two exposed students to verbally aggressive messages and the teacher's use of slang. Condition three involved the use of teacher slang, but no verbally aggressive messages. The fourth condition was a control condition where the teacher did not use verbally aggressive messages or slang. In the conditions where there were verbally aggressive messages, there were seven such messages. In the conditions where there was slang, there were ten such occurrences.

The following were the verbally aggressive messages: (1) Giving the middle finger to other drivers. The same symbol I would give some of you if I saw you driving around. (2) Except when they're talking to a guy like that guy in the back of the room here, then they're probably waving goodbye, get out of here. (3) Like in this classroom, I

realize that this is West Virginia, but I urge you all to shower at least once a week. (4) Although some of the questions you were asking your professor earlier were pretty stupid. (5) This also means that some of you loud mouths would have to shut up once in a while. (6) Or if you come visit me, I probably would roll my eyes as if to say what in the world do you want! (7) Although from the looks of you, some of you do not date a lot.

The following were the teacher's use of slang: (1) You give the middle finger to other drivers, signifying screw you. (2) You probably would not want to get him pissed off. (3) What the hell. (4) You are damn happy to see them. (5) Thinking oh God this sucks. (6) And you'll say, "What's up your ass - what's wrong." (7) You are having a bitch of a day. (8) You know that you are screwed. (9) Say oh hell and then stop. (10) You want to make sure that you have your shit together.

A teacher who lectures in nonverbal communication taped himself giving a seven minute introductory lecture to kinesics. This lecture was then transcribed. In the original lecture, there were no verbally aggressive messages or uses of slang. This lecture provided the "script" for the control lecture. From this script, the three other scripts were created. A graduate student who was not involved with this project and had no contact with the students at this university was used as the lecturer for the audiotapes. Besides the fact that he had no contact with the potential participants, this individual was also chosen due to his background (i.e., undergraduate voice and diction major, experience taping and editing audiotape). The length of the lectures ranged from seven minutes for the control lecture to nine minutes for the lecture that had the verbally aggressive and slang messages.

Procedure

Participants volunteered to attend a research session outside of class. Attendance at research sessions ranged from 3 to 15 students. At the beginning of the research session, the students were instructed that they would be listening to a short lecture on nonverbal communication. They were also told that this person was giving this lecture as part of a job interview for the university and that the university administration was interested in their feedback on this instructor. The students were asked to listen to the lecture, and then answer some brief questions about the lecturer and the lecture.

Participants listened to one of the four prepared lectures. The lectures were randomly selected, although attempts at the later sessions were made to equalize the sample size of each of the conditions. Overall, 39 participants were exposed to condition one, 45 to condition two, 39 to condition three, and 44 to condition four. After listening to the lecture, the participants were given a questionnaire that included various measures that looked at perceptions of the instructor and the lecture. After all the participants at a session had completed their questionnaires, the questionnaires were collected and the participants were debriefed and thanked.

Instruments

Competence and character were operationalized by using McCroskey, Hamilton, and Weiner's (1974) Source Credibility Scale. For both variables, there are six 7-point semantic differential items. The variables for competence were: reliable-unreliable, uninformed-informed, unqualified-qualified, intelligent-unintelligent, valuable-worthless, and inexpert-expert. The variables for character were: honest-dishonest, unfriendly-friendly, pleasant-unpleasant, selfish-unselfish, awful-nice, and virtuous-sinful. In this

study, the mean scores were 31.70 (SD = 6.23) for competence and 25.81 (SD = 5.47) for character. Coefficient alphas were .87 and .78, respectively.

Teacher's use of appropriate use of language was operationalized using an adapted version of Canary and Spitzberg's (1987) Conversational Appropriateness Scale. The Conversational Appropriateness Scale is a 20 item, 7-point Likert-type scale, with responses ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (7). This scale was adapted so the items focused on the lecture versus a conversation (e.g., His lecture was very suitable to the situation, I was comfortable throughout the lecture with his remarks, He was a smooth lecturer). One item was totally rewritten ("S/he interrupted me in the conversation" was changed to "He used words that were not appropriate for the classroom"). The mean for the 20 item scale was 64.68 (SD = 20.22). The coefficient alpha for the appropriateness scale was .96.

Teacher immediacy was operationalized using Andersen's (1979) Generalized Immediacy Scale. This measure starts off by defining immediate behaviors as those communication behaviors that reduce distance between people, psychological or physical. Examples are given of nonverbal behaviors that are considered immediate. Individuals are then asked to rate their instructors on nine 7-point semantic differential type items. The items ask the students to rate the immediacy and the teaching style of instructor. The mean for this scale in this study was 42.52 (SD = 15.69). The coefficient alpha for teacher immediacy was .97.

Teacher affect and lecture affect were operationalized by using subscales of Kearney, Plax, and Wendt-Wasco's (1985) Affective Learning Scale. Each subscale consists of four 7-point semantic differential type items. Subjects were asked to rate the

teacher and the lecture using the following sets of words: bad-good, worthless-valuable, fair-unfair, and negative-positive. The mean scores were 19.69 (SD = 5.90) for teacher affect and 21.81 (SD = 4.33) for lecture affect. Coefficient alphas were .85 and .92, respectively.

Whether the instructor should be hired was measured using one question: What is your opinion on whether this instructor should be hired by this university? On a scale from 1 to 100, with 1 representing DEFINITELY NOT and 100 representing DEFINITELY, what recommendation would you give? For this one item measure, the mean was 69.95 (SD = 26.65).

Results

The research question was addressed by looking at how the participants in the four conditions differed in their perceptions of the instructor and the lecture. To identify the group differences, two Multiple Analysis of Variance analyses (MANOVAs) were conducted, follow by a series of Analysis of Variance analyses (ANOVAs).

In the first MANOVA, the dependent variables of competence, character, immediacy and appropriateness were included. The result was significant $F(12,413) = 5.47$, Wilks = .68, $p < .001$. All four follow up ANOVAs were also significant: Competence $F(3,159) = 7.68$, $p < .001$; Character $F(3,159) = 14.09$, $p < .001$; Immediacy $F(3,159) = 10.65$, $p < .001$; and Appropriateness $F(3,159)$ 18.48, $p < .001$.

The results showed that the instructor's competence was higher in the control condition than in the verbally aggressive and the combination conditions. The instructor's character was significantly higher in the control and slang conditions versus the other two conditions. For instructor immediacy, the slang lecture was considered to

be more immediate than the verbally aggressive condition, while the control condition was higher in immediacy than all of the other conditions. For appropriateness, the slang lecture was rated as more appropriate than either the verbally aggressive or combination conditions, while the control condition was rated higher than all three of the other conditions. The means for the four conditions for each of the dependent variables are given in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

In the second MANOVA, the dependent variables of teacher affect, lecture affect, and whether the lecturer should be hired were included. The result was significant $F(3,392) = 3.62$, Wilks = .82, $p < .001$. All three follow up ANOVAs were also significant: Teacher Affect $F(3,163) = 7.73$, $p < .001$; Lecture Affect $F(3,163) = 4.14$, $p < .01$; and Hiring $F(3,163) = 4.63$, $p < .01$.

The results showed that participants had more teacher affect for the slang and control conditions than the verbally aggressive and combination conditions. Participants also reported greater lecture affect for the slang condition over the verbally aggressive and combination conditions. For hiring the instructor, the verbally aggressive condition was rated significantly lower than all three of the other conditions.

Discussion

What do the results from this study indicate to teachers. A strong, but not surprising finding, is that a teacher using verbally aggressive messages is perceived very negatively. Therefore, avoid being verbally aggressive with students at all costs. The results involving slang are a little more mixed. While students clearly distinguish between a teacher's use of slang and that teacher's use of verbally aggressive messages,

at times using slang is perceived more negatively than if slang was not used. In the next few paragraphs, these findings will be further explored, future directions for research will be offered, and limitations will be acknowledged.

Teachers should not use verbally aggressive messages. In this experiment, the messages were not directed towards the subjects, but towards the members of the "class" who were present during the lecture. Even when the verbally aggressive message was not directed towards them directly, students perceive the teacher as being inappropriate and low in credibility. If the verbally aggressive messages were directed towards them, student negativity should magnify. When a teacher is verbally aggressive, students do not like the teacher and they do not like the subject matter, thus creating quite a hostile atmosphere for learning to take place.

Advice for using slang in the classroom is not as clear. Some students appear to really like hearing teachers use slang. Students may believe that the teacher is adapting communication to the audience, instead of talking down to them. Other students, while recognizing the difference between slang and verbal aggression, may still perceive slang as not being the type of language that a teacher should use in the classroom. Some students may perceive slang as inappropriate for the classroom but acceptable in a different setting. Others may find the slang used to be offensive. Words like ass, shit, piss, and bitch may be considered to be obscene and to be avoided in all situations.

At the same time, the only times the instructor who did not use slang or verbal aggression was rated significantly higher than the instructor who did use slang were for the variables of immediacy and appropriateness. The slang instructor was perceived as having just as much credibility, and students expressed just as much affect for the class

and the teacher. Teachers that use slang seem not to be judged negatively by students. Students appear to be able to distinguish between a use of slang, such as "I've had a bitch of a day," and a verbally aggressive message that may also have a slang word included, "You are a stupid ass." Overall, teachers need to be aware of their specific class (i.e., audience) in choosing the language that they use in the classroom.

The results from this project offer several directions for future research. This study looked at teacher communication. In order to understand students' perceptions of the teacher, it may be beneficial to pay attention to receiver characteristics. How verbally aggressive students are and how often they use slang may influence their ratings of an instructor. Perhaps students that perceive the instructor as being similar to them view the instructor more favorably. If a student uses slang, the ratings for a teacher that uses slang are higher than the ratings from a student who never uses slang.

A second area to explore is the effect of teacher's use of verbal aggression and slang on cognitive learning. This study focused on perceptions of the teacher, and to a small extent, affective learning. Does insulting students influence cognitive learning? At face value, some people would answer of course. Others may argue that verbally aggressive messages could be used at times, similar to an athletic coach, to motivate students to work harder. "You are the laziest group of students I have ever had. I feel sorry for the employers that you will work for one day." While this statement is verbally aggressive, a teacher may believe that the intent of this message is to motivate students, instead of hurting them. Similarly, does using slang improve cognitive learning? If slang is positively related to affective learning, based on previous research, the expectation

would be that slang could have a positive influence on cognitive learning. Future studies will have to investigate these ideas.

The speaker on the audiotape was a man. Would the results be different if the speaker was a woman? Research has shown that men tend to be more verbally aggressive and that both men and women expect men to be more verbally aggressive (Martin & Anderson, 1996; Nicotera & Rancer, 1994). Thus, would male instructors be allowed to be more verbally aggressive and use slang more frequently with being perceived as negatively as a female instructor might if she used the same words? Students may view a female instructor talking in this way as being an expectancy violation and may have stronger negative affect towards her, than a male instructor.

A final future direction that will mentioned here is the possibility that different populations may view verbally aggressive messages and slang differently. The students who participated in this study were attending a public university. If the students were junior high students, high school students, students from a private religious university, or an older population of students, a teacher who uses these types of communication messages may be viewed differently.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. This study was an experiment, and therefore, all of the problems of generalizing from an experimental setting to the actual classroom exist. Students listened to an audiotape, versus their usual way of attending lectures where there is a visual and audio component.

There was also little incentive for students to process and retain the material that was discussed in the lecture. While this was not a focus of this study, when students enter a situation with the expectation that they must learn the material from a given

instructor, their view of how that instructor communicates may differ from listening to the instructor on audiotape. This study recognized some of the perceptions that students have of teachers that do or do not use verbally aggressive messages and slang in the classroom. The effect of actual learning was not measured.

Finally, students listened to one, seven minute lecture. Long-term exposure to an instructor that uses verbally aggressive messages and/or slang may impact students differently versus a single exposure. Students may adapt to an instructor after a while, focusing on the content, versus the specific communicator style. Research would suggest that students would not view a verbally aggressive teacher more favorably over time, but this proposition would need to be supported by further research.

In closing, use slang cautiously; do not use verbally aggressive messages at all. How a teacher says something definitely influences students' perceptions of the teacher and the class. Do not hurt your credibility or effectiveness by using language that students find inappropriate.

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Table 1

Students' Ratings of the Instructor on the Audiotape

	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
Competence	29.26a	30.07ab	32.51bc	34.82c
Character	23.38a	23.20a	27.97b	28.73b
Lecture Affect	20.41a	21.11a	23.51b	22.25ab
Teacher Affect	16.67a	18.69a	21.64b	21.66b
Immediacy	35.90a	37.90ab	43.16b	52.36c
Appropriateness	55.41a	54.58a	69.79b	79.00c
Hire	56.92a	71.07b	76.38b	74.66b

Note. Means sharing the same letter do not significantly differ from one another.

Condition 1 = verbal aggressiveness. Condition 2 = verbal aggressiveness and slang.

Condition 3 = slang. Condition 4 = Control (no verbal aggressiveness or slang).